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Bishops and People

Looking for Local Religious Life in Late Antiquity

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ABSTRACT The religiosity of late antique and early medieval communities in the Mediterranean world has been vigorously examined and debated. This religious life has been called (among many other terms) ‘popular Christianity,’ ‘local Christianity,’ the ‘second church,’ ‘*Religion zweiter Ordnung*,’ and ‘the third paganism.’ In my article, I analyse late antique religious life from the viewpoint of encounters—between the ideals of the ecclesiastical elite and the people’s local cultic practices. These practices, embedded in the local communities, varied by regions, but we can see similarities in the interaction of bishops with their local population. I will show how the ecclesiastical writers portrayed local cultic practices in negative terms as another religion (‘paganism,’ ‘idolatry,’ ‘demonic/diabolic practices’), divergent from their own (‘Christianity’), or even as a distortion beyond ‘proper’ religion (‘magic,’ ‘superstition,’ ‘sacrilege’). In my analysis, I discuss and test various approaches that scholars have developed to understand the tensions between the bishops and the local people: David Frankfurter (local religion), Rubina Raja and Jörg Rüpke (local lived religion), and Nicola Denzey Lewis (magic as lived religion), Lisa Kaaren Bailey (lay religion) and Lucy Grig (popular culture). My focus is on the western Mediterranean world from the fourth to sixth centuries, and the cases of polemical encounters I analyse come from the writings of North Italian, Gallic and Hispanic bishops (Paulinus of Nola, Maximus of Turin, Philaster of Brescia, Caesarius of Arles, and Martin of Braga). I also compare the North Italian, Gallic and Hispanic situations with those in North Africa depicted by Augustine of Hippo.

KEYWORDS Late Antiquity, popular Christianity, local Christianity, late Roman world, Christian bishops, local religion

Introduction

How is it that foolish people think they should, as it were, help the moon in its eclipse? ... This they imagine they can overcome by the sound of a trumpet or the ridiculous tinkling of bells that are violently shaken, believing that they make

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the moon friendly through the empty belief of pagans and by their sacrilegious shouting. (Caesarius of Arles, *sermon* 52.3; trans. Mueller 2004, 260, modified)

This passage is from a sermon by the late antique Gallic bishop Caesarius of Arles (c. 470–542), who warned his audience about several rituals. One of them is the practice called *vociferatio populi*, in which—as Caesarius described—people shouted, blew trumpets, rang bells, and made noise in many other ways during the eclipse of the moon. It is clear from his depiction that people who performed this ritual belonged to his congregation, and this is why he took such great pains to admonish his listeners to stay away from such practices.¹ [2]

Caesarius not only mocked the ritual as stupid (“ridiculous tinkling”), but also labelled it as a pagan and sacrilegious act (“empty belief of pagans,” *vana paganorum persuasione*, and “sacrilegious shouting,” *sacrilegis clamoribus*). Caesarius’ method of encountering local practices was either to denounce them as sacrileges, that is, violations of proper religion, or to alienate them as paganism, that is, an entirely different religion.² In another sermon, Caesarius’ way of representing the people’s activities as alien religion is even more manifest: he declares that “even though they arrive to church as Christians, they return from it as pagans.” This is because they perform dances and pantomimes in front the churches, a custom which he declares to be a remnant of pagans’ practices (*de paganorum observatione*). According to Caesarius, these people do not feel any shame for the sacrileges of pagans (*sacrilegia paganorum*). Furthermore, their practices are the devil’s poison (*venenum diaboli*) (Caesarius of Arles, *sermon* 13.4) [3]

In this article, I look at religious life in the western Mediterranean world in late Antiquity from the viewpoint of encounters between the ideals of the ecclesiastical elite and the local cultic practices of the people. These practices were embedded in the local communities, and they varied by region. Nevertheless, we can perceive a number of similarities in the interaction of bishops with their local populations and in the ways in which bishops verbalized the differences between their own ideals and the local practices. Similar patterns are found in the Greek East, but my analysis focuses on several localities in the Latin West. I will show how the ecclesiastical writers portrayed the people’s local cultic practices in negative terms—either as another religion (‘paganism,’ ‘idolatry,’ ‘demonic practices,’ ‘diabolic practices’) completely divergent from their own (Christianity), or even as a distortion (‘magic,’ ‘superstition,’ ‘sacrilege’) outside ‘proper’ religion. An outsider might have interpreted the encounters between the church leaders and the people as intra-religious encounters within the Mediterranean religious traditions. However, the discourses of the ecclesiastical elite portrayed local practices as alien pagan religiosity, and consequently, these highly polemical encounters were argued to be inter-religious ones.³ The interplay of different forces on the local level also demonstrate how religious traditions were constantly negotiated, formed, and reshaped.⁴ [4]

1 The research for this article was supported by the Käte Hamburger Kolleg ‘Dynamics in the History of Religions Between Asia and Europe’ at Ruhr-Universität Bochum. I have enjoyed and benefited from the many inspiring discussions in the Kolleg in spring 2019 and the thoughtful advice of Eduard Iricinschi and Marianna Ferrara as well of the anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this article.

2 ‘Paganism’ was a construction of Jewish and Christian writers for a variety of religious practices and beliefs, usually polytheistic; there was never a religion called paganism in Greco-Roman Antiquity. For a discussion on the concept of paganism, see Jones (2014, 2–7).

3 In these polemical accounts of local religious practices, the label of heresy appears very rarely. The divergences in practices were articulated using the categories of paganism, sacrilege, and magic, while the differences in doctrine and beliefs were usually formulated using the category of magic.

4 For the formation of traditions, see Hobsbawm (1983, 1–3) and Bronner (2011, 27–50).

Epistemological Problems

My focus is on the western Mediterranean world from the fourth to sixth centuries, and the cases of polemical encounters that I analyse, come from the writings of North Italian, Gallic, and Hispanic bishops such as Maximus of Turin, Caesarius of Arles, and Martin of Braga. My analysis is not meant as a systematic survey on specific geographical areas but rather as a series of case studies that illustrate the encounters and tensions between bishops and the local people. I have chosen these bishops' texts because they illustrate the tensions between the church elite and the local people, and their date and place can be reliably documented. [5]

All these bishops' texts, as well as other sources from the same period, sermons, letters, tracts, penitentials, church council canons, laws, hagiography, and histories, are problematic in their own ways. All these sources were written by the ecclesiastical or other educated elites, and therefore the references and descriptions were made from an outside perspective and predominantly with either condemning or, at best, condescending attitudes.⁵ Furthermore, as mentioned above, these encounters are intensely polemical, which renders the depictions by the outside perceivers biased and distorted. [6]

When thinking about the sources that emerge largely from the viewpoint of the church's elite observers, we face considerable epistemological problems. How can we find out what these people were actually doing and performing? How much do literary sources written by bishops and priests reflect the people's actual beliefs and practices rather than the clerics' literary conventions? Who were these people? This discrepancy is certainly found throughout Greco-Roman Antiquity and the Middle Ages. In his research on Roman festivals, Fritz Graf (2015, 18) draws attention to the relationship between the actual ritual reality and fictionalized descriptions. [7]

We have a thick interpretative filter in our sources. Inevitably, we obtain most of our 'information' on the religious practices of the time from the writings of bishops and other ecclesiastical authors, and modern research has faced this fact with both pessimistic and optimistic approaches. For example, modern scholars have drawn attention to a series of early medieval catalogues that list forbidden practices. These catalogues seem to repeat the prohibitions of earlier lists almost word for word, and these condemnations were reiterated over the centuries (Hen 2015, 183–90, 2008, 51; Filotas 2005, 45–48, 2002, 535–48). Did these repetitions cut-and-paste fashion have any reference to social reality? Or were they only conventions of ecclesiastical leaders and councils? Did the clerical elite have any clue what was happening in the social life of the ordinary people? Were these writers able to outline the practices in their regions? The depictions tell us about the necessities of the writers and preachers—what they thought was important to mention and condemn.⁶ To take another example, now from hagiography, the religious practices described in the saints' lives were filtered through the literary demands and formulas of the hagiographical genre. In sermons, we find an ample repertoire of traditional rhetorical devices, including rhetorical exaggeration. Nonetheless, Christian preachers had to make their arguments and attitudes resonate with their audiences.⁷ [8]

Likewise, in late antique poetry, aristocratic writers such as Ausonius (c. 310–395) and [9]

5 The ecclesiastical elite was not the only elite group in late Antiquity, and it was often in rivalry with other elites such as local landowners, senatorial aristocrats, imperial courtiers, and the military elite.

6 Different lists abound not only in church council canons, but also in laws and heresiological treatises. These lists have been analysed as part of knowledge ordering in late antique society: see Berzon (2016, 1–26) and Flower (2013, 172–94).

7 This is pointed out by Salzman (2015, 346–47).

Paulinus of Nola (354–431) described local forms of religiosity according to the sophisticated conventions of Greco-Roman literature. Consequently, the people’s practices were represented in a learned formulaic manner. Using highly poetic expressions, Ausonius depicted how, in his own household, his dependents abandoned the “incense to be burnt,” the “slice of honey-cake,” and “hearths of green turf,” and instead addressed their prayers “to God and to the Son of God most high, that co-equal Majesty united in one fellowship with the Holy Spirit” (Ausonius, *Ephemeris* 2.2; ed. by Green 1991, 7–8). For his part, Paulinus of Nola described how peasants ritually slaughtered animals in honour of his patron saint Felix in 406 and utilized the traditional language of Roman sacrifices (Paulinus of Nola, *Carmen* 20; ed. by Walsh 1975, 169). If one thinks realistically, these poetic depictions—despite all the formulaic and literary fluff—may have revealed something about the flexibility of the local populations to respond by adapting or conforming creatively to changed circumstances.⁸

According to more optimistic views, such as the ones of Lisa Kaaren Bailey and Bernadette Filotas, it is possible to examine the rhetoric of denigration in the sources and, at the same time, find out the creative ways in which people “intergrated traditional practices within new schemes of authority” (Bailey 2016, 4). Moreover, in outlining the people’s practices, the clerical writers used formulaic styles according to the conventions of their education. What these authors do communicate are their attitudes: sometimes appreciation, usually wonder, condescension, contempt, or fear. Occasionally, as a side effect, they may unveil something about the life of local communities, creative adaptations, new and old beliefs intertwined, new and old rituals adapted, and new and old divinities venerated. As Bernadette Filotas (2005, 47) points out, “customary formulations may have corresponded in some general way to actual behaviour.” The late antique and early medieval world is by no means exceptional, since scholars of other historical periods face similar problems with their sources. When looking at the early Roman Imperial period and reading the descriptions of popular religious practices by Greco-Roman elite writers such as aristocrats (Cicero), philosophers (Seneca), and historians (Tacitus), we perceive comparable, often formulaic, vilification, ridicule, or even condemnation.⁹ This is not to say that all elites held the same opinions or collaborated with each other. The church leaders sometimes rivalled for authority with the local landowners and military leaders.¹⁰

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Labels and Categories

The second epistemological problem derives from the definitions, designations, and labels that modern scholars attach to the local religiosity of late antique and early medieval people. Their religious life has been given many names, among them ‘pagan survivals,’ ‘the third paganism,’ ‘popular Christianity,’ ‘local Christianity,’ the ‘second church,’ ‘*Religion zweiter Ordnung*,’ even ‘magicised misrepresentation of Christianity,’ and so forth. Modern researchers still use the term ‘pagan survivals,’ referring to the legacy of the traditional Greco-Roman religions adopted into popular Christianity. While in many ways these epithets may be apposite

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8 For the discussion on Ausonius’ and Paulinus’ literary imaginations of a smooth transition from paganism to Christianity in their household and their bishopric region, see Kahlos (2019, 235–45), Bowes (2007, 143–44), Trout (1995, 281–98), and Frankfurter (2011, 86–87).

9 The attitudes of the fourth- and fifth-century Christian elite writers had their roots in the Jewish and early Christian as well as Greek and Roman discourses. Christian apologetic writers adopted the Greek philosophers’ and Roman writers’ ridicule of foreign and popular ‘superstitions.’ Furthermore, Christian writers also adopted the discourse into their treatises against heresies. See Kahlos (2007, 99–110).

10 For the rivalry for authority between the elites in the case of funerary practices, see Brown (1981, 32–36).

in depicting one or two aspects of the religious changes in the late Roman and post-Roman world, they do not suffice. As Jitse H. F. Dijkstra (2008, 16–17) points out, neither “Christianization” nor “pagan survival” provides an adequate representation of the dynamics of religious transformation in late Antiquity.¹¹

Furthermore, it is not entirely clear how modern scholars understand ‘pagan survivals’ or ‘Christianization.’ In late Antiquity, the ecclesiastical elite writers were prone to define everything they disliked as persistent survivals from the pagan past and as regrettable side-products of swift Christianization, and this is often how modern scholars tend to define pagan survivals, although in more neutral terms than the grumpy late antique bishops. Bernadette Filotas (2005) takes a pragmatic approach in which she acknowledges the fact that evidence comes from the institutional perspective, the church, and is necessarily biased by ecclesiastical interests. Therefore, she simply admits that as scholars, we only deal with “what the clerics thought existed, not necessarily what did exist” (2005, 13). Therefore, Filotas (2005, 16 n.11) uses the terms “paganism,” “superstition,” and “pagan survivals,” and does not see them as too problematic. I definitely sympathise with her solution of using these terms as emic conceptions while remembering that the accusations of paganism by late antique bishops are rather to be interpreted as disagreements over how to be Christian.¹² I nevertheless am worried about the semantic load that the use of the term “pagan survival” carries along with it—not only the vague idea of immutable and timeless primitivity, but also incorrect expectations of a unified “pagan” tradition (Frankfurter 2005, 267; see also Meyer and Smith 1999, 7; Humphries and Gwynn 2010, 494–95). Moreover, behind the notion of ‘survival’ haunts a missionary agenda in which the ecclesiastical elite’s narrative of a triumphant Christianity is taken as a given. This is also stressed by Jaclyn Maxwell (2012, 852), who argues that the triumphal narrative had to include “bits of the past smuggled into, and leaving a stain.”

What terms can one use instead of the conventional ones? Late antique and early medieval religious life needs to be approached, as far as possible, in its own right.¹³ The encounters between the ecclesiastical elite and local people can be seen as intra-religious encounters—within the local Mediterranean religious traditions. The clerical writers addressed their complaints to the congregation that, in the writers’ view, needed to be guided away from their own practices.¹⁴ The ecclesiastical writers represented these practices as alien religion, ‘paganism,’ but admitted that the people who performed these ‘pagan practices’ regarded themselves as Christians. They referred several times to baptized persons.

We need to look beyond the categorisation and the listing of groups in the ecclesiastical writings. Ecclesiastical writers had their ideals of what ‘proper’ religion should be. Adopting the late antique writers’ categories of alien religion (paganism) or distorted religion (magic) would be misleading and confusing. Therefore, I use the more or less neutral term ‘local religion’ to describe practices and beliefs that church leaders often—but not always—objected to. Another strand of conceptualising in the research of late Antiquity is the concept of ‘lived

11 See also Frankfurter (2005, 173–75), who stresses the complexity of the religious transformation in late antique Egypt that cannot be simplified as “pagan survival” or “native misunderstanding.”

12 This also how Filotas (2005) understands the late antique writers’ aspirations.

13 See Graf (2015, 5), who in his research on late antique and early Byzantine festivals remarks that some festivals “survived into a Christian empire – not as a pagan survival that was destined to disappear with ‘full’ Christianization, but as a festival in its own right.” Nonetheless, Graf (2015, 8) later purports, strangely, that “paganism disguised itself in a Christian world.”

14 See Salzman (2015, 346–47) on bishops widening the category of actions, beliefs, and rites that were deemed “pagan” and their ways of painting “pagans” as the moral other. See also Bailey (2016, 128) stating that many of the clerics’ attacks placed “pagan” behaviour within a Christian framework.

religion’—religious practice in daily life—as a counterpart to the religion of doctrines dominated by church councils and theologians.¹⁵

We need to examine the ways in which local religious diversity was treated in ecclesiastical rhetoric. Furthermore, we need to open up for careful analysis the discourse of the ecclesiastical elite that argued local religious practices and beliefs to be another religion or distortion of proper religion. We also need to look at the late antique and early medieval contexts and discourses within which derogatory terms arose in order to understand how and why they were used. Bishops and other clerical writers composed their condemnations as self-appointed ideologues of separation. In their sermons, preachers not only described the social circumstances but rather shaped and manipulated the views of their audience, representing the people’s activities as pagan or magical “in order to depict them as clearly beyond the pale,” as Bailey (2016, 15) remarks. Beatrice Caseau (2011, 117) shows how private cultic practices were construed as magical practices. Likewise, the old Roman concepts *superstitio* and *sacrilegium*, that had earlier been used to control cultic diversity, were adopted into ecclesiastical use (Rüpke 2011).

Yet another term, ‘popular religion,’ has been used to refer to everyday religiosity, lived religion, even though distinguishing ‘popular’ in the late antique and early medieval context is problematic since ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ or ‘high’ and ‘low’ are closely intertwined. Modern scholars often call local practices “popular,” as does Ramsay MacMullen in his magisterial *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200–400* (2009, 95, 98).¹⁶ The distinction drawn between the elite and the people is misleading in several cases. Not all activities were confined to the (so-called) ordinary, uneducated people. The elite and the common folk often shared notions of the sacred and had recourse to apotropaic practices. A representative of the elite, for example, the clerical elite, could also articulate a sharp distinction between himself and the people as a means of showing himself as belonging to the upper levels of the social ladder.¹⁷ It is also important, as Lucy Grig (2018, 67) points out, to perceive popular culture as “a culture which can be shared by various subgroups, with diverse possible relationships to elite and official culture(s).” Popular religiosity and elite ideals were in constant tension and interaction with one another. One term that is more neutral is ‘laity,’ used by Bailey (2016, 2010), which goes beyond the contraposition between popular and elite. It was lay behaviour that the church elite aimed to change.

Practices in the Bishops’ Firing Line

We cannot necessarily always trace what local people were doing, but we do get an idea of what was bothering the ecclesiastical writers and what made them extend their efforts to root out local practices. They represented practices they considered objectionable as alien religion, paganism. This included not only rituals performed during different feast days and funerary practices, but also drinking, eating, dancing, singing, and having sex. Consequently,

15 See also Frankfurter (2005, 257–67) (local religion); Raja and Rüpke (2015, 4) (lived ancient religion); Raja and Rüpke (2015, 11–19); Raja and Rüpke (2015, 1–26) (local lived religion); Šterbenc Erker (2009, 75–97); Auffarth (2003, 14–26); Denzey Lewis 2017 (2017, 258–59) (magic as lived religion); Sessa (2018, 198–226) (religion in daily life); McGuire (2008) (lived religion in the modern context, focusing on the individual’s usage of religion).

16 MacMullen (2009, 31) estimates “popular religion” to comprise 95% of the whole Christian population.

17 See Maxwell (2012, 857–59) on the juxtaposition between popular and official religion as taking on class connotations. See Grig (2018, 65) on bishops like Caesarius of Arles addressing landowners and speaking as one *dominus* to another.

we perceive bishops and other clerics making decisions on behalf of the people and defining repeatedly what belonged to their Christian life and what was alien to it. Undesirable practices were deemed pagan, and thus believed to exist outside the community. The writers, however, had to acknowledge that the people who performed these undesirable practices thought of themselves as Christians. One of the ways of ‘outsourcing’ the undesirable was to blame ‘pagans’ for seducing Christians to adopt these practices.¹⁸

The practices that were condemned and labelled included a wide range of activities such as greeting the rising sun, the worship of angels, kissing the columns of the church, using sacred scriptures and relics in amulets, hanging pylacteries on doorways, street corners, and fields, fulfilling vows to trees and fountains, using the sign of the cross inappropriately, doing masquerades during the New Year celebration, refusing to work on Thursdays, calling the weekdays by the names of deities, and excessive drinking, eating, and dancing at funerals and martyrs’ memorials.

Many of the local practices that ended up in the bishops’ firing lines, and that were categorized as pagan survivals, remnants of superstition or magic, were rituals aimed at protecting fields and the yearly harvest. Research needs to understand them in terms of local religious systems and pragmatic concerns. Rural people performed these rituals and used various phylacteries to avoid or mitigate the calamities brought on by hailstorms, drought, and other unwanted weather conditions as well as to guarantee the fertility of fields and vineyards (Filotas 2002, 535–48; Jones 2014, 121).¹⁹ Maximus of Turin complained that peasants built altars (which, for Maximus, were diabolical) and placed animal heads around their fields (Maximus of Turin, *Sermon* 91.2). Peasants especially worried about hailstorms that could damage crops in an instant.²⁰ Church councils forbade the activities of “cloud chasers,” among other ritual experts, such as sorcerers, purveyors of amulets, and diviners, who were to be cast out of the church if they persisted in “these deadly pagan practices” (Council of Constantinople held in Trullo in 691, canon 61; see also Stolte 2002, 114).

Instead, ecclesiastical leaders offered a proper Christian alternative for the protection of the fields: according to Sulpicius Severus, his holy man Martin of Tours could protect fields from hailstorms (Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogus* 3.7). In the fifth and sixth centuries, Gallic bishops also provided the people the *Rogationes*, a three-day sequence of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, vigils, and processions through the city. The *Rogationes* functioned not only as a unifying feast of the Christian community, but also as mitigation of divine indignation by prayers.

18 See Augustine of Hippo (*Sermon* 62.10.15), who complained about pagans who did not necessarily openly tempt Christians into worshipping the idols, the shrines, and the feasting, but who did so somehow nevertheless. Likewise, at about the same time, the bishops at the Council of Carthage mentioned not only that pagans forced Christians to attend their festivities (*a paganis christiani ad haec celebranda cogantur*), but also that pagans did not shun taking part in the Christian celebrations of the holy martyrs (Council of Carthage, canon 60). Both Augustine and the council’s objections may tell us about cross-pollination and mixing between pagans and Christians in communal merriment. However, the complaints may also refer to people who considered themselves to be Christians and whose activities church leaders severely censured and defined as pagan action (MacMullen 1997, 6, 163n.9).

19 See Augustine (*Enarratio in psalmos* 70.1.17), who discussed different trades and professions, and explained that each trade in itself was not bad, but that the performers might act badly. Thus, the work of artisans or merchants was not evil; neither was that of farmers. It was a person’s actions, such as a farmer’s decision to seek aid from a sorcerer, that made him evil. Augustine exclaims, “Is it that I may become a farmer, that I may murmur against God who sends thunder, and that fearing a hailstorm I may consult a sorcerer?” Honest farmers did not do such things.

20 Fields were also protected against hailstorms with phylacteries set on the boundaries of the fields: see Trombley (1993, 1:183) and Nieto (2010, 551–99). For ritual experts called *tempestarii* in the early Middle Ages, see Meens (2012, 157–66).

However, as Lisa Kaaren Bailey (Bailey 2016, 105, see also 113–115) argues, the people “might not always have taken from such rituals what the clergy wanted them to.”²¹ As Sidonius Apollinaris’ rather condescending remarks imply, what the people might have expected from the *Rogationes* (in addition to meals) was “petitions for rain or for fine weather” (Sidonius Apollinaris, *Letter* 5.14).²² The dynamics in the case of Rogations indicates that bishops could add and mould practices within the traditional local repertoire of rituals and festivities and thereby gain some control over the local people’s religion. It was not necessarily the local that bishops were against but rather that which was uncontrollable for them. If bishops deemed the practices acceptable, these were regarded as Christian or at least ‘neutral,’ meaning non-religious. Thus, the ‘paganness’ of each practice very much depended on the perceiver’s stance. In some cases, bishops railed against popular martyr cults if relics were ‘found’ and tombs were visited without episcopal authorization. Similarly, Christian identity and episcopal authority were connected with debates on late antique divinatory practices: when divination was in tight clerical control, it was considered part of Christian life; when not, practitioners were labelled as the enemies of God.²³

The practices that the bishops condemned proliferated in late Antiquity. In the following I discuss only a few of these from the viewpoint of othering them as alien religion. [21]

Moon Eclipses

As noted in the beginning of this article, Caesarius of Arles censured the custom of the *vociferatio populi*, the shouting during the eclipse of the moon, but he was not the only one to do so. In early fifth-century Northern Italy, Maximus, the bishop of Turin (d. c. 420), also reprimanded the local people in two of his sermons for shouting and otherwise making noise. In the first sermon, he tells his audience that while he was puzzled about the people’s activities, they explained to him that their clamour was “helping the moon in its labour” and “aiding its eclipse” (Maximus of Turin, *Sermons* 30–31). In his reaction, Maximus showed the superior sentiment of the educated elite. He derided and condemned the people’s custom as both a *vanitas* and a *sacrilegium*: Outwardly devout Christians (*quasi devoti Christiani*) believed they were able to help God in guiding the heavenly body, as if God were weak and unable to guard the heavenly lights that he himself had created. The custom was a *sacrilegium* because it was an insult committed against God the Creator (Maximus of Turin, *Sermon* 30.2–3).²⁴ [22]

In the second sermon, Maximus reiterated his admonitions about the *vociferatio populi*, and added further warnings against what he labelled, this time, as both magic and pagan error. He condemned “those who believed that the moon can be moved from the heaven with magicians’ charms (*magorum carminibus*).”²⁵ He demanded that the people discard “their pagan error” [23]

21 For the history of *Rogationes*, see Nathan (1998, 275–303). Flint (1991, 340–41) states that the Rogation Days replaced the old Roman *Robigalia*, which was also celebrated for protecting harvests. Even if we do not interpret the *Rogationes* as an immediate substitute for *Robigalia*, there certainly are connections between the two celebrations.

22 The protection against hail and drought was important, as is evident from the *Eusebius Gallicanus* collection 25.1, ed. Glorie, *CCSL* 101, 295; *Rogationes* in connection with drought and floods were mentioned by Caesarius of Arles, *Sermons* 208.2; 207.3.

23 See Luijendijk (2013, 8–9) and Klingshirn (2007, 114–16).

24 On the importance of distinguishing clearly between the Creator God and the created (universe, elements, nature, humans), and on retaining the cult only for the Creator, see also Maximus of Turin, *Sermon* 62.2; Augustine, *Sermon* 198aug.25–31.

25 Drawing down the moon was a common trope in labelling ritual experts as magicians: see Edmonds (2019, 1–2). The most well-known example is the depiction of Medea in Ovid’s *Heroides* 6.84–93.

(*errore gentili*). Again he described the custom as a *vanitas* that he derided, and furthermore, to highlight the people's stupidity, he paralleled the people's diminution of the mind with the diminution of the moon (*Sermon* 31.1). Thus, for Maximus, the custom of the people is not only foolishness to be ridiculed, but also something dangerous, namely magical practice (*Sermon* 31.3).²⁶ The label of magic functioned here as Maximus' way of outcasting rival practices and practitioners as treacherous, illicit, and illegal. This was an established method against rival ritual experts in Greco-Roman and Christian Antiquity.

Caesarius Arelatensis had similar approaches to the *vociferatio populi*: he denoted the custom not only as ridiculous but also as sacrilegious and, consequently, utterly condemnable. Caesarius also took a superior stance as the representative of the educated elite, calling the participants in the ritual "stupid people" (*stulti homines*). Similarly to Maximus of Turin, Caesarius scoffed at people who believed that they could aid the moon in its labours. To stress the ignorance of the people, he gave the scientific explanation of the eclipse of the moon that was current in his time: its fiery globe was covered by air or was dimmed by the heat of the sun (Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon* 52.3; also 13.5; see Klingshirn 1994, 214–15). Maximus and Caesarius—like many other ecclesiastical writers—were concerned about what they considered doublemindedness or divided loyalty among their parishioners. Caesarius, for example, complained how people came to church as Christians, but when they left they started acting as pagans (for example, by dancing, a ritual that was originally pagan, according to Caesarius). He construed a contrast between two cultic activities and called them the "sacrament of Christ" and the "diabolical poison" (*post Christi sacramenta ad diabolica venena redeatis*) (Caesarius of Arles, *Sermons* 13.4 and 53.2).²⁷ In Caesarius' definition, anyone who sought help from sorcerers (*praecantatores*) became sacrilegious and pagan (*sacrilegus et paganus*) (Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon* 54.1).²⁸ Lunar eclipses continued to be mentioned in early medieval ecclesiastical writings: for example, an early medieval penitential ordered a five-year penance for clerics who performed magical rituals during the eclipse of the moon (Filotas 2002, 535–48 n.20).²⁹

All these reprimands by the bishops aimed at rendering the conduct, these specific practices of local people, as unacceptable and therefore 'pagan.' Instead, the bishops demanded their audience to abstain from the condemned practices and attend the services led and controlled by the bishops. We do not always know who the participants mentioned by the bishops were, but the practices often seem (again, according to the bishops) to have been shared by Christians and non-Christians. What was problematic was their status outside episcopal control; for bishops, they consequently represented unacceptable elements (pagan, idolatrous, sacrilegious, demonic).

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26 Maximus stressed that the moon—in the manner of the church—was troubled by magicians' incantations but could not be harmed. Magical incantations (*incantationes*) had no power where the song (*canticum*) of Christ is chanted. Thus, Maximus aimed to show his audience that his church had stronger means than the people's incantations.

27 Caesarius (*Sermon* 54.6), like many other bishops, enhanced the contrast by appealing to the Apostle Paul's delineation in 1 Cor 10:20-21: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of the devil." Maximus of Turin (*Sermon* 98.1) also appealed to the Apostle Paul's authority.

28 Caesarius (*sermo* 53.1) also compared the behaviour of non-conforming Christians with the practices of pagans who had not yet received baptism; see also *sermo* 54.1: *illas sacrilegas paganorum consuetudines*.

29 The penitential is attributed to Bede (Beda Venerabilis). In many cases, the ecclesiastical council canons and other authoritative texts focused on disciplining the activities of the clergy (Filotas 2005, 58; Grig 2018, 67).

Works and Days

Another set of activities that distressed church leaders were the feast days and the week that regulated the rhythm of local life. In western Latin-speaking Mediterranean regions, bishops took a hostile stance towards the seven-day week that was named after the planetary deities—for instance, calling the third day of the week *dies Martis*, ‘the day of Mars.’ The modern names of the weekdays in several Romanic and Germanic languages actually are, for the most part, based on the names of Roman planetary deities.³⁰ [26]

Interestingly, in the eastern, Greek-speaking part of the Mediterranean world, church leaders were not troubled (at all) by people calling the weekdays by the names of planetary gods, like the third ‘the day of Ares,’ *heméra Áreos*. As Mark Anderson shows, this dissimilarity was due to the different pace of Christianization in East and West. In the West, Christian leaders seem to have taken the names of deities as a threat to Christian identity, while in the East the ecclesiastical elite seem to have been more confident—at least as regards the planetary week (Anderson 2019, 128–91). This difference in attitude also illustrates how forms of Christian identity-building varied in diverse social circumstances. Anderson explains the difference with different demographic trends: in the East, Christian communities became more prominent than in the Western part of the Empire, and these adopted the seven-day cycle from the Jews. Perhaps this is why “Greek Christian leaders did not feel threatened by the planetary week and even used it as a bridge to communicate Christian values to a population in the process of embracing that faith” (2019, 155–56). [27]

For Latin Christian writers, using the names of planetary deities for weekdays was by no means a neutral thing to do, but instead the practice was outcast as a pagan, heretical, or sacrilegious thing. In the 380s, Philaster of Brescia labelled the use of planetary weekday names as a heresy. Instead of using the gods’ names, he insisted, God had named the days according to their numbers (Philaster of Brescia, *Diversarum hereseon liber* 113). In his chronographic work, the fifth-century Polemius Silvius mocked pagans who “stupidly gave names” to the days (Polemius Silvius, *Laterculus* 3). Likewise, in early sixth-century Gaul, Caesarius of Arles maintained that God had created all days, the first, the second, the third day, and so on, and all days were equally good. Therefore, there was no reason to ponder on which day one should travel (Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon* 54.1). He condemned the use of the names of gods as well: these were monstrosities (*monstruosa portenta*). He admonished his parishioners to “flee from all these sacrileges (*sacrilegia*) and to avoid them as the deadly diabolical poison.” In fact, Caesarius repeated — four times in the same passage—what a sacrilege the custom was and how sacrilegious people or gods (for Caesarius, demons) were. After this sermon, the people must have known what the bishop’s stance was. In Caesarius’ opinion, it was not harmless at all to go on pronouncing “those filthy names with our mouths.” Therefore, his parishioners should never speak of “the day of Mars,” “the day of Mercury,” “the day of Jupiter” but only of ‘the first, second, or third day’ (*primam et secundam vel tertiam feriam*) (Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon* 193.4). In the sixth-century treatise *On the Correction of the Rustics* (*De correctione rusticorum* 8), Martin, the bishop of Braga (c. 520–579), castigated baptized Christians who nonetheless continued using the names of demons (that is, old gods) for the weekdays. These persons had not embraced Christianity with their whole heart (*non ex toto corde*), and they [28]

30 The Latin names of the planetary gods were interpreted as Germanic and subsequently adapted into several European languages. For the development of the seven-day week, see Anderson (2019) and Salzman (2004).

were still hesitant (*dubii*) in their faith.³¹ Martin was keen to indicate that these persons were actually not proper Christians.

In a few ecclesiastical texts, special attention is drawn to Thursday, ‘the day of Jupiter,’ *dies Iovis*. Caesarius of Arles complains in three sermons about the observance of *dies Iovis* by the local people (*Sermons* 13.5; 19.4; 52.2). He rebukes men who do not work and women who do not weave on the fifth day (*quinta feria*) of the week and warns them to correct their custom—and here we have a *sacrilegium* again. These “wretched and miserable” people avoid work—in honour of Jupiter on that day, but they are not ashamed or afraid of working on the Lord’s Day (Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon* 13.5). Caesarius forbids his parishioners from observing the fifth day in honour of Jupiter by refusing to work. Rest from work is reserved for the Lord’s Day only. By shifting the observance from the Lord’s Day to Jupiter’s day a person acts sacrilegiously (*sacrilege*) and—Caesarius emphasizes—will be judged to be among the pagans (*inter paganos*) rather than the Christians (*inter Christianos*) (*Sermon* 19.4). In the third sermon, Caesarius states that the custom of observing *dies Iovis* by refusing to work is found not only in other regions, but also in his city of Arles, among “some wretched women” who refuse to work with the loom and spindle (*Sermon* 52.2).³² [29]

Likewise, Martin of Braga mentions emphatically that “those who are pagans and ignorant of the Christian faith” observe the day of Jupiter. This, he states, should be evil and shameful enough. Thus, Christians should stay away from that custom and keep on honouring the Lord’s Day. Martin’s main concern here is that his parishioners should observe the Lord’s Day and that there should be no working in the field, meadow, vineyard, or other place on that day (*De correctione rusticorum* 18). The observance of the fifth day in honour of Jupiter “for a pagan motive” (*secundum paganam causam*) is briefly mentioned in the penitential attributed to Bede as well, in a list of suspicious practices that ought to be shunned (Filotas 2002, 535–48). Likewise, in 589, the church council of Narbonne refers to “many of the Catholic faith” who “celebrate the fifth day that is called Jupiter’s day” with “horrible rituals” and a refusal to work (Council of Narbonne (in 589), canon 15). It is unclear what these horrible rituals were. The church councils, one after the other, certainly repeated prohibitions over long periods of time, but as Ilaria Bultrighini (2018, 68–69) points out, the canon of the council of Narbonne at least suggests that sometime before it convened, the observation of *dies Iovis* was considered a problem. [30]

The planetary seven-day week, observed from the third and fourth centuries onwards, was a late arrival in the Roman world, whose rural economic life had for a long time functioned in eight-day cycles of *nundinae*. The customary observance of the day of Jupiter is mysterious, as we do not have much evidence for it. In addition to the condemnations in ecclesiastical sources (sermons, penitentials, and church councils), the observance of the day of Jupiter or Zeus is known only from very few, rather uncertain mentions in three late third- and early fourth-century papyri from Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. These papyrus documents imply some sort of holiday status and suspension of official business on the day of Zeus (*héméra Diós*). As Bultrighini (2018, 69–84) suggests, it is possible that the day of Jupiter increased in [31]

31 For the source-critical problems concerning Martin of Braga, see Filotas (2005, 49).

32 Caesarius stressed that the custom violated the baptism and the sacraments of Christ—thus the fundamentals of his religion. Filotas (2002, 535–48) suggests that Caesarius’ denunciation is targeted against women workers in the textile industry in and around Arles, but it is difficult to verify this.

importance during the Diocletianic reign (284–305) as the emperor elevated Jupiter as his patron god.³³

Both bishops (such as Caesarius and Martin) and the church councils were particularly interested in stressing which day should be dedicated to rest and which days to work. This indicates that there was a keen contest over whose days were duly observed (for the contest over time, see Salzman 1999, 123–34). The same uneasiness applied not only to the weekdays, but also to other important days such as *Kalendae*, the first day of the month. Ecclesiastical leaders were much concerned over *Kalendae Ianuariae*, the New Year's day that, in late Antiquity, had grown into one of the most prominent festivals of the year.³⁴ For church leaders, the local celebrations of the New Year were pagan superstition. Maximus of Turin made it clear to his audience that those who adhered to “the custom of the old superstition of vanity” (*consuetudinem de veteri superstitione vanitatis*) celebrated the *Kalendae Ianuariae* (Maximus of Turin, *Sermon* 98.1). Maximus was mainly distressed by the notion that his parishioners observed both the Lord's birthday and the New Year, and he was at pains to assure them that one was Christian and the other pagan: one “a heavenly banquet” (*caeleste convivium*) and the other “a meal of superstition” (*superstitionis prandium*) (Maximus of Turin, *Sermon* 63.1). Parishioners who wanted to embrace both celebrations were the bishops' headache. Augustine exclaimed, “I wish it were only the pagans whom we grieve for!” (*Utinam solos paganos plangeremus!*). He declined to regard those who celebrated the New Year as real Christians, calling them “so-called Christians” (*qui vocantur Christiani*) (Augustine, *Sermon* 198augm.9). For Caesarius, the New Year with its dancing, drinking, and masquerading was the “devil's pomp” (Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon* 192.2).³⁵

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Concluding Remarks

Religious ambivalence and unacceptable conduct were exiled outside the Christian community and were portrayed as alien religion (paganism, idolatry) or a break from proper religion (*sacrilegium*, *superstitio*, or magic), often all within the same writing or sermon. In interpreting the ecclesiastical writers' condemnations of what they considered the misbehaviour of the local people, a modern scholar always runs the risk of adopting the late antique authors' perspective as her or his own. Therefore, modern research needs to break away from traditional dichotomies, such as pagan/Christian, religion/magic, and religion/superstition, and observe religious practices in the late antique and early medieval world on their own terms. Instead of taking local forms of religiosity simply as magic, pagan survival, sacrilege, or superstition, modern scholars need to analyse local practices as *creative applications* in their different socio-political contexts.

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The late antique clerical writers' complaints and categorizations of ‘pagan’ and other alien activities may actually be the best evidence of ordinary people practicing and living up to their own views of religious boundaries. Furthermore, ecclesiastical elite writers were not a

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33 For other references in ecclesiastical texts as well as for the discussion on the papyri, see Bultrighini (2018, 69–84).

34 The celebration of Saturnalia and the New Year together formed a long period of feasting at the turn of the year from the late fourth century onwards. The celebration of *natalis Christi* only intensified the feasting. Modern research on *Kalendae Ianuariae* is vast; see, e.g., Meslin (1970, 23–46, 73–75); Grig (2016, 1–36); Graf (2015, 201–25).

35 Caesarius complained that people masked themselves as animals (like elks) and soldiers dressed in women's clothes. Other bishops also mentioned masquerades and cross-dressing; see Maximus of Turin, *Sermon* 16; Pacian of Barcelona, *Paraenesis ad poenitentiam* 1; Petrus Chrysologus, *Sermon* 155.6.

unified front against what they saw as the misbehaviour of the local people. What was at stake was episcopal authority, and in the rivalry for local authority, the aims of the bishops could clash with those of other bishops and clerics, the landowning elite, and the local people. Bishops regarded the practices as a threat to their episcopal authority. The church leaders often attacked popular practices because these practices were out of their control. Those aspects that functioned in concert with bishops' authority were rebranded—and those that did not were cast out. They were not necessarily the same aspects in every region, depending on the bishops' local needs to reinforce their authority.

In the case of the Rogations, Gallic bishops were able to append new practices to the local set of feasting and thereby at least partly control the conduct of the local people. Other bishops, such as Paulinus of Nola, succeeded in channelling traditional sacrifices into the ritual slaughter in honour of Saint Felix—at least this is how he represents his enterprise. 'Cleaning' sacrifices and other local practices regarding 'pagan' elements was a method by which a bishop tried to take these practices into his episcopal control and add them to the Christian repertoire. Each church leader was in perpetual debate and dialogue with his audience. Therefore, Christianity was never a uniform monologue, controlled by the ecclesiastical elites.³⁶ The simple buzzword 'Christianization' will be reassessed and become more nuanced when perceived as part of the broader history of late antique transformation—within the interaction between the spheres of local religiosity and the religion(s) of the elite(s) who introduced their own normative views of religion and attempted to control religious knowledge in public life.³⁷ In these condemnations of late antique bishops, the 'pagan' was the construction by which they coped with uncontrollable elements in their community. What the church leaders portrayed as pagan-Christian entanglements often were entanglements of local Mediterranean traditions. By constructing the 'pagan' Other, the church leaders aimed at the construction of Christian identity to their own taste. The encounters between bishops and people also illustrate the ever-changing nature of traditions, practices, and identity.

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36 See Bailey (2010, 27) on the dialectics of preaching in late Antiquity. The clerical preachers certainly attempted to control the discourse, but they ended up in dialogue, which they seldom intended.

37 See Grig (2018, 62–63) on the interaction between popular religiosity and that of the elites.

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